

WORKING WITH COPYWRITERS

A Wordtree explainer



Word↑tree

Wordtree explainers - a little intro

For people who've never worked with copywriters before - or who have, but aren't quite sure what's involved - we've created this Wordtree explainer.

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WHAT IS COPYWRITING?



What is copywriting?

What is a copywriter?

It's someone who writes for commercial purposes - which means they're writing to persuade and/or explain.

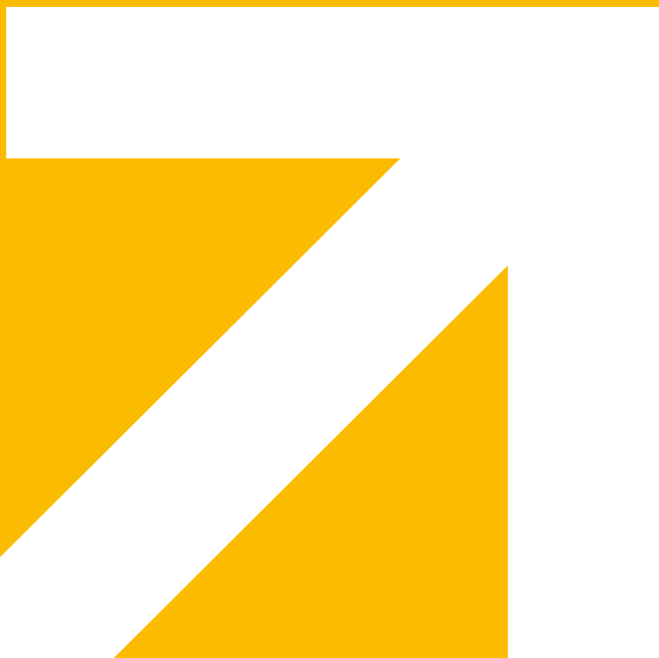
What does a copywriter do?

A copywriter creates text that elicits a response. This could be helping people to understand how to give up smoking. Or it could be getting them interested in a new type of investment, car or technology. The text can be in any form - for a website, a speech, a brochure, packaging... anything.

But surely everyone can write?

It's true that most people can write. However, most people fail to produce writing that can persuade other people to think or do things. It's a bit like most people being able to cook - but very few of us being able to create a beautiful six-tier wedding cake. So if you want to get people excited about a product, offer or idea, it's a great idea to hire a copywriter to help you. Brilliant copywriters work quickly and creatively, giving you fresh approaches and ways to breathe life and interest into the things you want customers - or the general public - to get excited about and feel empowered by.

**THINGS TO
THINK ABOUT
BEFORE YOU
START**



Things to think about before you start

If you're looking at your website and wishing it was more up-to-date. Or you're developing a new product and you need to be able to describe it to the world. Or you want to get more people to understand what a difference your services could make to them... well, then it could be time to think about hiring a professional copywriter.

Before you start emailing potential copywriters, we suggest thinking about your:

- Timings
- Definition of the project (the brief)
- Budget



Things to think about before you start

Timings

To give your copywriting project the best chance of success, you need to give your copywriter enough time to do it justice.

Ideally, you should involve them as early on in the project as possible - allowing time up front for research and idea generation. When your copywriter has time to digest your brief and get to know your organisation, they can come up with ideas and help you shape your thoughts. They may even suggest alternative approaches that you haven't considered yet.

Some copywriters are brilliant and fast (we like to think that we are) - but there's no doubt that we do a better job when we've had a couple of days to think about a project, rather than launching straight into it.

As well as including time to set the project up for success, you should also think about the time you and your organisation will need to dedicate to it. For example, what does your internal feedback process involve? How long will you need to review and comment on each draft? Who are the stakeholders involved - and what's their availability? It's important to factor this into project timings before you start, because you don't want a project to stall half-way through because a key stakeholder is on holiday and can't sign it off.

Things to think about before you start

Defining the project: The brief

It can be tempting to simply “brief” a copywriter in a quick email or phone call. In our experience this approach can end in frustration on both sides – especially if you’ve never worked with the copywriter before.

We find it’s more productive in the long run to spend time up-front creating or co-creating a brief. This is the document that outlines what the project is, what the resources are for completing it, key dates and any other parameters. It’s like a scope of work, with a bit more background detail.

Having a detailed brief is important, because it’s the foundation for sharing your ideas. Imagine for a moment that you’re hiring an interior designer. You tell them in a quick email that you want your bedroom to be mostly pink – and to be something that will make you stand out on social media. You also say you want it to be finished for when you get back from a holiday.

This is what you have in mind...



However, when you get back from your hols, you find this...



Because your brief wasn’t detailed enough, you end up with a 70s porn pad, rather than a Scandi-inspired, peaceful retreat.

Here’s what’s useful to include in a copywriting brief:

- Overview of your project and how the copywriting fits into it
- What you need to say, and to whom (messaging)
- How you want to say it (your tone of voice)
- Results – what does success look like, what do you want this project to achieve?
- Format – where is the writing going – web? Flyer? Email? A4 brochure?
- How it will be delivered (most copywriters use Word – is this OK?)

If you know exactly what’s needed, set it all out. Remember to include details like who your competitors are, details of your market and audiences, any restrictions or regulation, details of your brand, tone of voice and messaging (if you have them).

If you know what you want to achieve, but don’t know exactly how to get there, be prepared to co-create a brief with your copywriter.

Things to think about before you start

Budget

If you're at the stage where you honestly don't know how much budget to set aside for professional writing, it might be a good idea to get quotes from a handful of different copywriters and copywriting agencies. [This is a useful resource about what copywriters charge.](#)

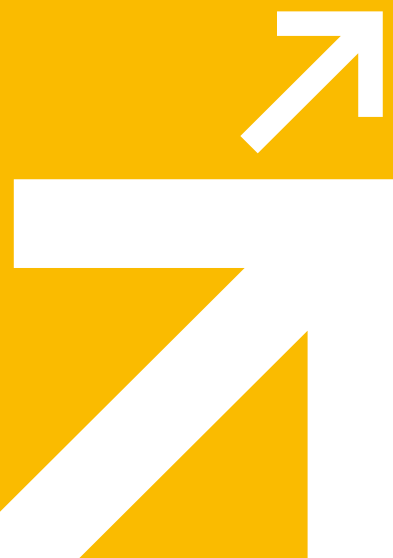
At Wordtree, we work in a couple of different ways. Often we provide an estimate for discrete projects. We arrive at a figure, based on how much time we think it will take to deliver the goods. This could include time for research and background reading, time for idea generation - and of course, time for writing, proofreading and sense checking back against the brief.

The other way is working on retainer. This means that a client who knows they'll need our services regularly agrees to hire us for a period of time (this could be anything between three months to two years). Over this period, we offer our retained client reduced rates and guaranteed availability.

We never charge by the word - because quality and quantity are not the same thing.

Is it ever OK to ask a copywriter to work for free?

We sometimes get calls - usually from creative agencies - asking us to work for free "because it could lead to more work". We smile politely and decline. We also get calls from charities asking us to work at heavily reduced rates. In the past, we've done it because we're nice - but it's problematic. Partly of course, because we're not a charity and we need make a profit to be able to pay salaries. But also, because charities are often more labour-intensive to work with than private sector organisations. They also seem happier for projects to take longer - and meandering can involve extra work. And of course, there's a piece of human psychology that says if you're not paying for it, or only paying a small amount for it, you don't value or prioritise it. So these days, we generally - and very politely - decline work from charities too.



FINDING THE RIGHT SUPPORT



Finding the right support

When you're choosing to work with any kind of professional, you generally ask around for recommendations. After that, your considerations might also include, what does it cost? Do they have the right qualifications and experience? Do I like them, and do they seem reliable?

We suggest it's exactly the same when you're choosing the right copywriter to work with.

Recommendations

If you know you're going to need the services of a copywriter in the near future, ask around. Pop a post on LinkedIn asking people in your profession/sector for recommendations. Or ask your colleagues in another department or team if they're already working with a freelancer or agency they trust.

What your budget will get you

How much can you afford? If you want a 40-page website to be written, and you know you can't spend more than £2k, you're definitely in freelancer territory (and probably, fairly inexperienced freelancer territory). Freelancers tend to cost less because they don't have the overheads of an agency - like salaries, rent, rates and insurance. The downside of working with a freelancer is there's no back-up or safety net if they're ill - and there's usually no second pair of eyes to check their work for accuracy, brand and brief alignment.

If you have a £10k+ budget for a 10-day project, you could start to look at agencies (like Wordtree). Agencies are more expensive because they can offer uninterrupted service. And because there's a team in place, you should get the benefit of their combined experience. So one team member may be brilliant at PPC ads... while another knows financial services and regulation back to front, for example.

Finding the right support

Qualifications and experience

In the UK, there is very little in the way of standard qualifications for copywriters. So you can't ask a copywriting professional if they've passed a certain exam and know that guarantees a certain level of quality.

Some copywriters specialise in certain areas - like technical writing, advertising or fundraising. Others may offer copywriting in more than one language. More still are generalists - able to turn their hands to most things.

If Wordtree specialises in anything, it's probably B2B and "complex". This means we're particularly good at making brain-achey concepts feel absolutely fascinating.

We think the best way to find the right person or organisation is to talk to them. Ask any copywriter you're considering working with about their experience. Have they worked with companies like yours before? Do they understand your sector? Can they show you examples of work they've done for others? Can they put you in touch with their other clients?

Do you like them?

This is important. At Wordtree, we like to become an extended part of our clients' teams. We're happy to attend meetings, put forward ideas and generally get to know our clients. However, this doesn't work for everyone.

If you want a relationship with a copywriter to be: You give instructions,

they deliver without question, we wouldn't be a great fit for you. And it's better to know this up-front than find us annoying when we send you links to articles we think you'll like - or suggest alternative ways to achieve a brief. Or say, "We like the idea of direct mail, but have you thought about putting this on LinkedIn?". Or volunteer our time to help at your events.

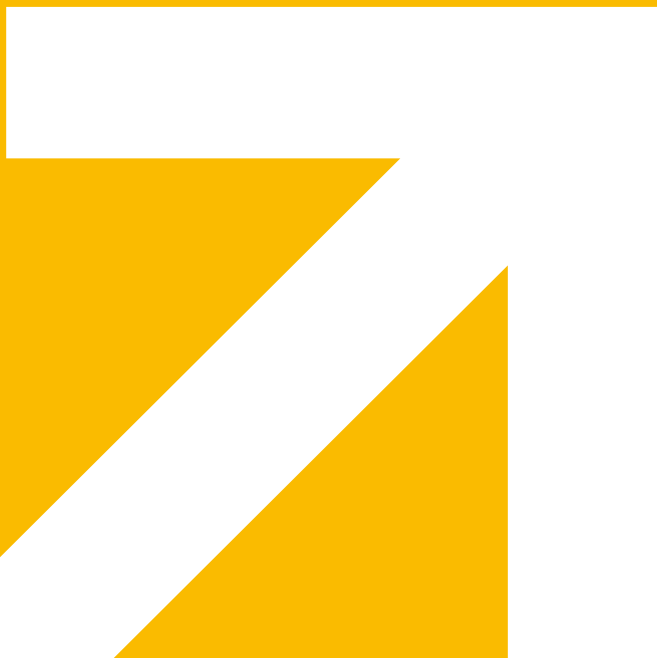
We are, in fact, rubbish at blindly following instructions. But we're brilliant if you need an actively involved, invested extension of your team.

To find out what a copywriter is like, it can be an idea to give them a very small job to start with. If you like their approach, if they don't get on your nerves and if they're reliable - then it's worth considering them for a bigger project.

Reliability

Continuity of service, consistency of service and a willingness to get up-to-speed quickly are all important. Ask your freelancer or agency about the measures they have in place to make sure your project will be delivered brilliantly and on schedule. We'd suggest that, "Oh I just promise it'll be done," isn't as good as, "We have processes in place, contingency, a designated contact for you and a direct line to the MD."

GETTING THE JOB DONE



Getting the job done

Getting a professional writer to create communications for you isn't like ordering a new printer. You don't ask for text for a new brochure on Tuesday and get it all back, exactly as you want it, by end of play Wednesday.

"Right first time" in copywriting is as rare as a unicorn's egg. For all these reasons:

1. When you work with a copywriter, you're collaborating with a creative professional who is interpreting and shaping your ideas. Unless they're psychic, they're probably not going to get this 100% right first time.
2. It's possible that through the process of seeing your ideas described clearly back to you, you decide you want to change direction. In other words, having a copywriter articulate your ideas may reveal flaws or opportunities you haven't seen or considered before.
3. It's unlikely that yours is the only view that will have to be taken into account. Let's say you really like the text your copywriter has shared with you - but then members of your team point out inaccuracies you weren't aware of... or think of a better way to do things. Or, unbeknownst to you, your company is about to perform a gear shift in its approach, and your original ideas may need to shift too. Or more likely, you have colleagues who don't like certain words and phrases and just want to remove them.

For these reasons, creative work - including copywriting - has to be iterative. This is to say, it's achieved via a number of drafts - each one getting closer to what you want as a finished product.

This is part of why we urge our clients to invest time at the briefing stage - and involve their colleagues in the process early on.

How many draft stages?

At Wordtree, we usually say three stages are enough. The first draft should be at least 60% right. The second should be at least 90% there. And the third draft should only need little tweaks (if anything at all).

This is what happens during a project that progresses as scheduled, and if the brief doesn't change or grow extra arms or legs mid-way through.

It's also why, if a project stalls for any reason (usually because our client needs to put the brakes on for a short while), we often ask our clients to rebrief us before we pick up where we left off.

Getting the job done

The process

Once you've found someone you're happy to work with, you then need a shared understanding of how your project will progress - as well as roles and responsibilities.

Every time we begin to work with a new client at Wordtree, we define this in two main ways:

1. The project plan - outlining project stages, key deliverables, timings and people involved
2. Our terms and conditions - which set out the ways we work, what we expect of our clients and what they can expect from us... and what happens if a project stalls on the client's side, or if the brief changes.

At the beginning of a project, we use this as a basis to start building a project plan. At set-up stage, we're looking to make sure all paperwork is in order, and that the brief is robust. (To be clear, this is what happens at the start of a lengthy or complex project. If a client we've already worked with asks us to write a quick email for them, we probably wouldn't need to go into all this detail.)

Many of our clients have us sign their terms and conditions, NDAs and contracts at this stage too.

Getting the job done - set-up stage

WHAT WE DO	WHAT YOU DO	OUTPUTS	COMMENTS
AGREE PROPOSAL We give you a timings and cost estimate. These will be further refined once we have agreed a full brief.	You outline your project at high level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timings and cost estimate 	
ADMIN SET-UP We work with you and your procurement or finance team to get the admin side of things set up, including: NDAs, contracts and payment details.	You raise a PO and put us in touch with your procurement or finance teams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NDAs • Contracts • PO 	If you don't use POs in your organisation, we'll ask for written confirmation and an initial first payment in advance.
DISCOVERY MEETING Preferably face-to-face, but we can also meet via Skype or conference call.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreed brief, scope, timings and project management approach - signed off by you and any key stakeholders • Actions agreed and documented on both sides • Meeting notes 	Investing time in co-creating a full brief makes the whole process more efficient. Investing time upfront = less time in execution.
ADMIN CHECKLIST Have you sent us... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PO? • Signed-off brief, scope and project plan? • All background information and resources? • Times for us to interview key people? 			We may ask you questions about the background information you share with us.

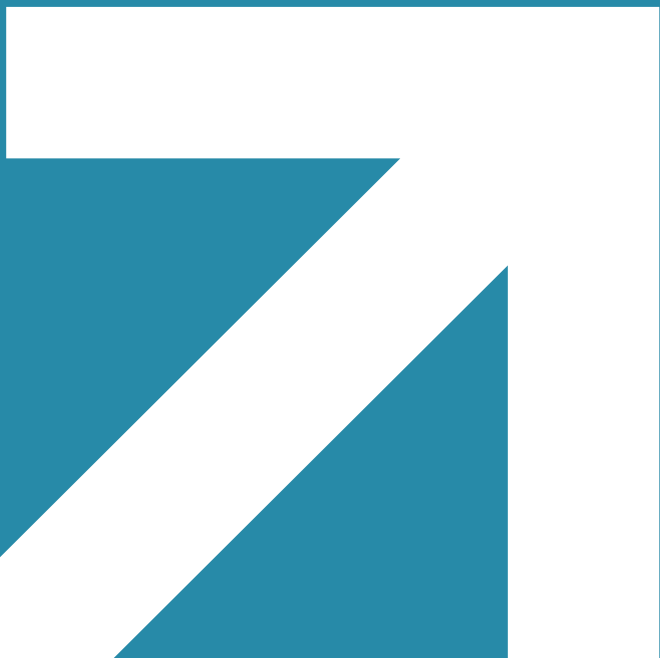
You'll see that as well as a "What we do" column, there's also "What you do". It's important to remember that you have a role to play - and to make time to be involved with how your project progresses. It's a bit like hiring decorators for your home. You need to be available to choose colours and decide where plug sockets should go. Otherwise, you could end up with a finished product that isn't quite right.

Getting the job done - implementation stage

When we've all agreed the approach, we use it as the basis for a day-to-day project plan.

WHAT WE DO	WHAT YOU DO	OUTPUTS	COMMENTS
SAMPLE COPY (IF NEEDED) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide short samples to check tone and approach Share guidelines on how to feed back We can also have a call to discuss feedback if needed 	Provide written feedback using tracked changes, according to our feedback guidelines. Your time: 1 hour approx.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Samples (1-3) Rationale documents explaining our approach Meeting notes 	We find it's more productive to check tone and approach very early in the project.
FIRST DRAFT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide first draft according to schedule We can also have a call to discuss feedback if needed 	Provide written feedback using tracked changes, according to our feedback guidelines. Your time: depends on the project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First draft Rationale documents explaining our approach Meeting notes 	The first draft should be at least 60% correct. Taking time to review and feed back thoroughly at this stage helps further drafts to go through smoothly.
SECOND DRAFT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide second draft according to schedule We can also have a call to discuss feedback if needed 	Provide written feedback using tracked changes, according to our feedback guidelines. Your time: depends on the project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second draft Rationale documents explaining our approach Meeting notes 	The second draft should be 90% correct.
FINAL DRAFT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide final draft (if required) 	Provide written feedback using tracked changes, according to our feedback guidelines. Your time: depends on project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final draft 	At this stage, we expect feedback to consist of small tweaks.
REVIEW LEARNINGS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation Next steps Case study Wider recommendations 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary of recommendations Meeting notes Case study draft 	Stay in touch - we're always happy to talk informally.

**KEEP YOUR
PROJECT
MOVING**



Keep your project moving

Wordtree - and we're sure, many of our colleagues out in the freelancing and agency world - try to be as flexible as possible to help our clients get projects over the line successfully. Your success, after all, is our success.

These are simply things to watch out for and legislate for, to help keep your copywriting projects on track and on budget:

No brief

If your copywriter doesn't have a firm idea of what she's supposed to be doing, there's a good chance she'll fail to meet your expectations. It's always worth investing time in a good brief.

Incomplete brief

Your copywriter thinks she has the full story, but it turns out mid-way through the project that there are some important stats, facts or factors that weren't included in it. This can completely change the focus of a project - and in doing so, slow it down.

Changing brief

When you started the project, you knew you had to achieve X. Then a line manager asks you to park the project for a little while to concentrate on something else instead. When you pick the project back up, X is no longer the point of it all. At this point, we'd suggest rebriefing, rather than trying to shoe-horn a change of direction into the original brief - which could cause confusion and delay.

Brief creep

When you started, you needed 10 website pages, and your copywriter quoted for this. But then you only needed eight pages, so you asked your copywriter to write six PPC ads instead of two of the pages... but the research for the PPC ads isn't the same as for the web pages. And then you say, "Could you just re-nose the eight pages so that they'll work on our intranet too?"

You haven't exactly changed the brief, but it's creeping into areas it wasn't supposed to initially. This can be tricky for copywriters. They want to help, but at some point, they're going to have to tell you that they'll need to charge extra. Brief creep is usually completely unintentional, but it can add pressure to timings, and actually, to client-creative relationships as well.

Keep your project moving

Incomplete information

We often need a lot more background than is immediately obvious. So for example, if we're creating a new product description, we may ask to see customer research, customer pen portraits, in-depth tech specs, background on the people involved in developing it – and much more besides. Getting to the heart of something often means doing an amount of skating around the edges first. Because knowing that your inventor has a background in developmental psychology – or used to be a firefighter – could give us exactly the angle we need to make your offer stand out in its marketplace. If you don't share all the background at the beginning, you may find your copywriter has to re-start some of the work.

Feedback not timely or not meaningful/relevant

When we create project plans, we allocate times for you to feed back – and you agree that these timings are achievable. If it then takes a lot longer to gather feedback, timings may slip. Similarly, if we ask three questions, and you only answer one – or the information you give us doesn't directly answer any of the questions – we will lose time.

[Download our guide on best practice for giving feedback.](#)

New stakeholders coming on board mid-way through a project

Your project has been powering ahead for a few weeks when you go to a meeting and someone says: "This is totally my area, would you like to loop me into the review process?" Then this person has new ideas too, and suggests switching tack, including new information and adopting a different tone of voice. All of these things might be for the good of the project. (Though maybe they're not.) But what they amount to is a re-brief. Alternatively, a colleague who was too busy to be involved in earlier rounds of review finds the time to comment at the 11th hour – when the project is all-but signed off. This can result in major amends being made after time has been allotted for this to happen. Which of course can result in timings being pushed – and costs being added.

Being uncontactable

Your copywriter may need to ask you questions – or ask you what you think about moving in a certain direction. If you're not available and don't respond to calls or emails, this could slow the process down.

Keep your project moving

If you feel something isn't working for you in your relationship with your copywriter, we strongly recommend picking up the phone and sharing your thoughts. A good copywriter will want to get it right for you. But they'll only be able to do this if you let them know what's working, what isn't working - and why it isn't working.

This doesn't have to be a confrontation. It's simply part of the iterative process.

Having a solid brief will help you here, because you'll be able to use it to say: "The first page is great, but I think page four has moved away from the brief too much... remember we're talking to intermediaries, not to customers themselves," for example.

Or: "I can see why you've led with message X, but I think on reflection, I prefer message Y."



Most of all, enjoy it

Working with a copywriter can be some of the best fun you'll have professionally. When you work with the right people, you get to be creative, see your ideas come to life and work in ways that your day job may not generally allow you to do.

And of course, work with the right people and you'll get results that reflect well on you professionally, helping you to win awards, gain influence and progress in your career.

If you have any questions about copywriting projects or the copywriting process, we'd love to hear from you.





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